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AUTHOR Anderson, Jeffrey
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ABSTRACT

This Digest defines service-learning as both a philosophy of education and an instructional method. As a philosophy, service-learning reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens in democratic life. As an instructional method, service-learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while students learn through active engagement. The Digest provides examples of service-learning activities in teacher education; distinguishes between community service, service learning and other forms of experiential education; cites reasons for integrating service-learning into courses; discusses approaches to integrating service-learning into teacher education programs; and cites a few research studies. Initial research results, teacher educators and preservice teachers all suggest that service-learning can be a worthwhile learning experience. But, there are many challenges to its successful use in teacher education including an already overcrowded curriculum, difficulties of arranging successful K-12 and community service-learning sites, and the linkage of service-learning to state and national teacher education accreditation standards. (Contains 14 references) (LL)

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Service-Learning and Teacher Education

Jeffrey Anderson

Introduction

Throughout the decade of the 1990s, the use of service-learning increased dramatically in both K-12 and teacher education. Educators at all levels report that well-designed and implemented service-learning activities can help address unmet community needs while simultaneously providing students opportunity to gain academic knowledge and skills (Root, 1997). Researchers and teachers note that service-learning often increases student self-esteem, promotes personal development, and enhances a sense of social responsibility and personal competence (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1995). This Digest provides a definition and examples of service-learning, examines rationales and approaches, reviews research, and discusses future challenges related to service-learning in teacher education.

What Is Service-Learning?

Service-learning may be described as both a philosophy of education and an instructional method. As a philosophy of education, service-learning reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens in democratic life. As an instructional method, service-learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while students learn through active engagement. A growing body of research indicates that carefully planned and implemented service-learning projects can contribute to both K-12 students' and preservice teachers' learning and growth (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Root, 1997).

Distinguishing Community Service, Service-Learning, and Other Forms of Experiential Education

Service-learning, community service, internships, and other types of field education such as student teaching are all forms of experiential education. They do differ, however, as to their primary focus and beneficiaries. Community service involves students providing assistance to individuals, organizations, or the community. The assistance can be direct (preparing meals in a shelter for the homeless or picking up trash in a park) or indirect (organizing a food drive or doing clerical work for a social service agency). In all cases, the primary focus is on providing a service and the primary beneficiary is the service recipient. Internships and student teaching focus primarily on the student's learning and the primary beneficiary is the service provider. Service-learning involves blending the key elements of community service and internships so both the service providers and the service recipients benefit. These benefits result from a dual focus on the service being provided and the learning that will occur (Furco, 1996).

Rationales for Service-Learning in Teacher Education

Teacher educators cite the following reasons for integrating service-learning into their courses: (1) to prepare new teachers to use service-learning as a teaching method with their K-12 students; (2) to help socialize teachers in the essential moral and civic obligations of teaching, including teaching with "care," fostering life-long civic engagement, adapting to the needs of learners with diverse and special needs, and having a commitment to advocate for social justice for children and families; (3) to enhance preservice teachers' ability to reflect critically on current educational practices and their own teaching; (4) to develop in preservice teachers the dispositions and abilities needed to easily and fully adopt other educational reforms such as authentic assessment, teaching with integrated thematic units, focusing on higher order thinking skills, and making improvements in school schedules and climate; (5) to accelerate the process of learning how to perform a variety of roles needed to meet the needs of students such as counselor, community liaison, advocate, and moral leader; and (6) to develop human service-oriented teachers who can work effectively in schools with integrated services or other social service settings.

Approaches to Integrating Service-Learning into Teacher Education

In order to help educators create high-quality service-learning programs a number of groups and individuals have established principles of good practice. Perhaps the most widely-referenced are the *Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning* (Porter Honnet & Poulsen, 1989). The other frequently referenced principles are the *Standards of Quality for School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning* (Alliance for Service-Learning in Educational Reform, 1995).

Teacher educators have applied these principles to widely varying degrees in their efforts to incorporate service-learning experiences in their teacher preparation programs. Erickson and Anderson (1997) include descriptions of 14 different approaches utilized by teacher educators at diverse institutions throughout the country. These approaches show considerable variation in the degree to which service-learning is integrated into course and/or program objectives. Approaches range from individual courses in which service-learning is employed as a method to achieve course goals to courses that share this focus but also endeavor to provide students with knowledge of service-learning as a teaching method and philosophy of learning. A growing number of teacher education programs also provide their preservice teachers with service-learning experiences in which they work with K-12 teachers in a school and/or community setting to design and implement service-learning projects.

Examples of service-learning activities in teacher education programs include (1) preservice teachers taking a social foundations of education course who tutor adults and children in ESL classrooms and at public libraries; (2) as a part of a social studies methods course students work with children in need in community agencies such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Neighborhood Centers, or Head Start; (3) special education majors coordinate service-learning projects with their own students during their student teaching assignments; and (4) preservice teachers in reading methods courses help coordinate a high school literacy corps, provide training, conduct evaluation studies, and lead reflection sessions for the tutors.

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American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
One Dupont Circle • Suite 610 • Washington, DC 20036-1186
(202) 293-2450 • (800) 822-9229 • http://www.ericsp.org

Research on Service-Learning in Teacher Education

Research regarding the influences of service-learning experiences on preservice and beginning teachers is in the early stages. The few studies that have been conducted indicate that service-learning is associated with gains for preservice teachers in the development of professional attitudes and values needed for successful teaching (Root, 1997).

Sullivan (1991) found that preservice teachers who had completed community service internships had a great degree of success in their student teaching experience, noting specifically ease in planning activities, communicating with parents, and using the interpersonal skills necessary to deal effectively with adolescents. Wade (1995) noted an increase in preservice teachers' positive attitudes about community participation, and gains in self-esteem and self-efficacy. Root and Batchelder (1994) concluded that preservice teachers who completed a service-learning class made significant gains in the complexity of their thinking about a social problem of childhood. Seigel (1995) found that teacher education students who completed a community service experience as a part of a course on diversity increased their sensitivity to diversity issues and became more insightful about their own responses to diverse students. Vadeboncoeur, Rahm, Aguilera, and LeCompte (1996) identified an increased commitment to social justice and a reduction in teacher biases in teacher education students who completed a service-learning experience. However, no changes were found in students' degree of social activism. Wade (1997) found that service-learning can be a means for empowering student teachers by providing them with authority and affirmation.

Future Challenges

Numerous issues face teacher educators as they develop service-learning experiences, including: (1) Should teacher education students participate in service activities themselves, learn to use service-learning as a teaching method for use with their future students, or both? (2) At what point(s) in the continuum of teacher education, from preservice to beginning teacher to master teacher, should preparation in the use of service-learning as a teaching method be placed? (3) Is it essential for preservice teachers to participate in service-learning in real community settings or is it sufficient to expose them to service-learning solely in on-campus settings? Jacoby et al. (1996) discuss a variety of issues in the administration, curricular integration, and institutionalization of service-learning pertinent to teacher education and other disciplines in higher education.

Research is needed to examine these questions and a number of other important issues. These include (1) identifying specific features of service-learning preparation that contribute to beginning teachers' interest in and use of high quality service-learning with their K-12 students; (2) characteristics of teachers, schools, and communities that hinder or support service-learning practice; and (3) the degree to which teacher education students' civic responsibility, commitment to social justice, and development of an ethic of care are developed through service-learning experiences designed to achieve these goals (Root, 1997).

Conclusion

Service-learning appears to have considerable potential as a method to achieve important goals of both K-12 education and teacher preparation. Initial research results, teacher educators, and preservice teachers all suggest that service-learning can be worthwhile and powerful learning experience. But there are many challenges to its successful use in teacher education, including the already overcrowded curriculum, the difficulties of arranging successful K-12 and community service-learning sites, and linking service-learning to state and national teacher education accreditation standards. As more teacher educators take on these challenges, innovative and successful approaches may emerge.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education
1-800-822-9229 http://www.ericsp.org query@aacte.org

Mary E. Dilworth, Director
Judy A. Beck, Associate Director
Jeffrey Anderson, Seattle University (Author)

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